

# Position Description Writing

Page 1 of 2

C-35

Position descriptions are tools used in recruiting, supervising, coaching and evaluating both employed persons and volunteers who work within the church or on behalf of the church. They are organized summaries of the qualifications, duties and responsibilities involved in a paid or volunteer position in the church.

## History and Background

Written position descriptions are a relatively new tool in the life of the church. The practice of writing formal position descriptions is one the church has borrowed from secular groups that have found them to be effective tools in personnel administration.

An appreciation for the value of having written position descriptions continues to grow in the United Church of Christ. Position descriptions are termed "ministry position descriptions." This language is used to help people understand the work they do as ministry.

## Common Practices

There is a longstanding practice in the United Church of Christ for churches to issue "a call" when a new pastor is selected. Often the call has consisted of detailed agreements between the church and the pastor, particularly related to salary and benefits. Increasingly, churches are developing detailed terms of call for pastors.

These go beyond monetary agreements to describe the nature of the pastoral work to be done.

There is not much precedent for having position descriptions for people who volunteer for work in the local church.

People who are asked to become a church school teacher or member of the governing board usually receive only a brief and informal description of what will be expected of them. Expectations may be intentionally misrepresented in order to get members to say "yes."

Many churches have constitutions and/or bylaws that list certain positions in the church--both paid and volunteer--and contain some information about those positions.

The task of preparing a position description for the pastor often rests with the pastoral search committee at the time a new pastor is sought. The ongoing work of keeping the position description up to date rests with the pastoral relations committee, a personnel committee or the governing board. Preparing position descriptions for other employees normally is done by a personnel committee, if there is one, or the governing board. Sometimes it is the responsibility of the pastor to develop and keep current position descriptions of people employed by the church.

The task of preparing position descriptions for volunteers may rest with the nominating committee, or with the particular group or organization that is seeking a volunteer.

There are several purposes served by a position description. Writing a position description forces a church to be clear about what it expects a person in a position to do, about the qualifications it wants the person to have and about how it will support the person. The completed position description is a valuable tool in recruiting people for positions, in supporting them as they carry out the responsibilities of the position and in evaluating the effectiveness of their performance. Position descriptions can prevent confusion and frustration that can be experienced when members receive no help as to how to do the work or are criticized because of the way they do it.

## Responsibilities

People who write position descriptions need to know what information to include and why that information is important. Your responsibilities may include:

- Preparing a comprehensive outline of a position description suitable for use in the church with employees or volunteers, including:
  - **Name or title of the position.** A few words or phrases should be sufficient. For example: Member of the Official Board, Primary Department Church School Teacher or Organist.
  - **Purpose of the position.** Describe why the position is necessary, how it contributes to the mission of the church and the

responsibilities of the person in the position.

- **Type of work** Describe what the person does and the kind of activities involved. For example: attend meetings, prepare lesson plans, make calls and write monthly reports.
- **Term of the position.** Specify how long the person is expected to serve, telling when the term begins and ends. It may also tell how persons are selected for the position.
- **Expectations the church has of the person.** Describe those responsibilities and expectations that are often assumed but not stated.
- **Accountability of the person.** This identifies the person or group to whom the person is accountable for fulfillment of duties and to whom the person can turn for assistance and support.
- **Relationship to the staff of the church.** This should describe how the person is to relate to the employed staff of the church as well as to other volunteers.
- **Qualifications sought.** Describe what is needed in the position, specifying experience, abilities, personal qualities and the amount of time necessary. Think in terms of these categories of qualifications: faithfulness, willingness and capability.
- **Support of the person and resources available.** Describe what the person can count on

receiving. For employed persons this will include salary and benefits. For volunteers this will include training and orientation for the position, opportunities to be with others or to work alone, materials and available budget.

- Determining which positions need position descriptions to be prepared.
- Determining who should be responsible for preparing specific position descriptions.
- Reviewing the present written descriptions, if they exist, for adequacy and accuracy.
- Preparing a position description for the first time. There are several ways in which the information for the description can be secured. Talk to the person who holds the position presently and/or to people who have held it previously. Ask them to describe the position as they experienced it. Ask for any suggestions for additions or changes to the description. Have the person or group to whom the person in the position will be accountable talk about what is expected of the person, and whether the expectations are reasonable.
- Developing needed provisions. If there are no provisions at present for some of the sections of the position description, find ways to develop these. For example, if there is no support for the person in the position, figure out how this can be provided.

- Insuring that the position description is specific, yet flexible. Where possible, use specific terms rather than general terms. For example, "occasionally" may mean twice a year to one person and once a month to another. Which is meant in the position description? However, the position should not be so precisely defined that the person has no opportunity to be creative or to try new ideas.
- Reviewing position descriptions every two or three years or when there is a change of the person filling the position. Make sure all information is still pertinent and accurate.

## Skills and Attributes Needed

- Commitment to the ministry of the church and appreciation for the many and diverse efforts that are needed to carry it out.
- Sensitivity to the unique characteristics and needs of people.
- General overview of all the activities of the church and how they relate to one another.
- Ability to secure information through conversations and interviews.
- Understanding of human motivation.
- Ability to write clearly.

## Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and Effectiveness

- Practice writing a position description using the outline for a position that you have held in the life of the church.
- Ask your conference and association whether they have position descriptions for volunteer positions.
- Ask local volunteer agencies in your community whether they have samples of position descriptions for their volunteers.
- Ask other churches whether they have position descriptions for paid staff members that you can use for ideas as you write yours.

## Issues Facing the Church

- In many churches, especially smaller ones, it may seem much too formal to write position descriptions. Are there ways to insure that the benefits of position descriptions can be secured even though written position descriptions may not be developed?
- The work of volunteers in the life of the church should be opportunities for them to offer their gifts in the ministry of the church. How can you assist church members in recognizing the gifts they might offer the church? Can the volunteer positions in your

church be enriched so they provide for a genuine contribution of individuals to the church's ministry?

- Many church members are volunteers in their communities or church positions beyond the local church. How can the local church relate to and support these people in their ministries?

## Questions

- How many positions--both paid and volunteer--are there in your church? Make a list. How many of these positions have position descriptions written for them? What are the pros and cons for developing position descriptions for each of these?
- Who has responsibility in your church for deciding whether position descriptions should be written? Who has responsibility for writing them?
- What are the fundamental qualifications that any person, filling any position in your church, should have?
- What are the most important sections of any position description? Least important sections? Why?